

## **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** April 19, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Birdtail Conservation Easement (R4)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 15 Minutes

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### **Background**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes the Birdtail Conservation Easement (CE) on approximately 3,980 acres owned by the Rumney Cattle Company. The property lies northwest of Cascade on the north edge of the Birdtail Hills, comprising mountain foothill grassland habitat intermixed with riparian and shrubland habitats. The property also encompasses about 1.5 miles of Birdtail Creek and Birdtail and Lionhead Buttes, two prominent geographic features in the area. The CE would conserve important wildlife habitat by preventing subdivision and development or other forms of habitat loss; perpetuating the agricultural lifestyle of the Rumney Cattle Company, including a grazing system that meets minimum FWP standards for grazing livestock; and conserving native plant communities. The proposed CE would also guarantee public recreational access to the property. The land would remain in private ownership and on state and county tax rolls.

These habitats are essential for maintaining stable big game populations as well as sharp-tailed and forest grouse, furbearer and other native wildlife species. The uplands include important breeding, rearing and wintering wildlife habitat. These habitats also provide valuable hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities. The purchase price of the CE, based on fair market value, is \$2,350,000. Additional department funding to help with necessary grazing system infrastructure shall not exceed \$41,500. Funding for this project would come from FWP's Habitat Montana Program and Deer and Elk Auction License accounts.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

In the spring of 2016, FWP Region 4 initiated a public scoping process for this proposed CE. A total of 13 formal comments were received during the scoping process, all in favor of the proposed project. On January 19, 2018, FWP Region 4 released a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for a 32-day public review/comment period. A total of 35 comments were received from individuals and organizations with 31 in favor, 1 opposed and 3 not specifying. Based upon the draft EA and public comment, a decision notice from FWP Region 4 was released recommending approval of the proposed Birdtail CE.

### **Alternatives & Analysis**

**No Action:** In the near term, the property would likely continue to be managed and maintained in its current form. However, in the absence of a CE, future land use practices could change, potentially impacting key habitat values, creating wildlife management conflicts, and reducing or eliminating public access opportunities.

**Proposed Action:** The traditional uses of the land would be maintained under the terms of the CE. The terms of the CE do require some of the current land management practices to be modified, such as the implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system and necessary infrastructure for such, and prohibit others, such as destruction of riparian areas or the breaking up of native ground. The proposed CE would serve to maintain future management options for protecting, conserving, and propagating wildlife by perpetually conserving the natural habitats, providing for the continuation of traditional ranching operations, and maintenance or expansion of public recreation on the property.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

The Department recommends approval of the Birdtail CE. The CE would conserve high value wildlife habitat, perpetuate the agricultural lifestyle of the Rumney Cattle Company, and guarantee public recreational access on the property.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve completion of the Birdtail Conservation Easement with the Rumney Cattle Company, as proposed by the Department.